



Tora Lane
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The “Strangely Apolitical”
Politics of Tora Lane’s Platonov

In her new book, *Andrey Platonov: The Forgotten Dream of the Revolution*, Tora Lane reads the fiction of Andrei Platonov—one of the great Marxist prose writers of the twentieth century—through the lens of twentieth-century, Western-European, existentialist philosophy. Lane’s contention is that Platonov “begins to ask questions about the experience of the modern world in terms of groundlessness, memory, interiority, and communality in a way that deserves to be brought into a dialogue with modern existential thought on modernity, literature, and communism” (6). Lane suggests that Platonov practiced a “proletarian existentialist realism that differs from Socialist Realism,” a distinction that she makes on the basis of the latter’s idealism and the tendency of the former to cherish “the insignificant reality of what is forgotten and rejected in people” (29). Lane deploys selections from existentialist and other philosophical thought, among which Martin Heidegger’s conception of

Being, Georges Bataille's notions of inner experience and ecstasy, and Jean-Luc Nancy's concepts of literary communism and being in common figure most prominently. Lane also works to put her book in dialogue with memory studies (1, 129). Lane's most interesting thesis relates to Platonov's treatment of "the problem of subjectivity" (35) in communism and artistic fiction. As she puts it, "the self [in Platonov] is thought of as the in-between of two forms of ecstatic existence in common" (131). Lane is right that Platonov envisioned revolutionary selfhood to involve a radical engagement with the other and a disavowal of personal interest. The intervention she attempts—"to reach an understanding of Communism in literature that is not communist literature" (130)—seeks to disentangle Platonov's artistic practices and representations of revolutionary selfhood from the revolutionary politics that engendered them. Lane proposes that we understand Platonov's work as an expression of a more universal critique of modern political subjectivity, which is predicated in a shared feeling of alienation and meaninglessness and which rejects the actual event of the Russian Revolution in favor of a communally oriented revolution of "the Inner" (6).

This objective does put Lane at odds with recent scholarship on Platonov. For many in the late Soviet period, Platonov figured as a Soviet dissident *avant la lettre*, a relentless critic of Soviet communism dedicated to exposing the failures and hypocrisies of the Revolution. The fact that Platonov devoted his entire adult life and creative oeuvre to this Revolution did not detract from the anti-Soviet message readers found in his texts. Beginning in the 1970s, new generations of scholars challenged the foundations of conventional "Sovietology," especially the totalitarian model of Soviet society in which the Party-State wielded total top-down control through propaganda and terror, effectively rendering the Stalinist subject a fearful, brainwashed automaton, incapable of reflection or agency. The "revisionists," as their adversaries labeled them, directed their scholarship toward bottom-up mobilization, upward mobility among working-class citizens, identification with the cause of socialism, agency within Soviet institutions, and various aspects of everyday life, which give us insight into "Soviet subjectivity" (Fitzpatrick 2007; Kotkin 1995; Halfin and Hellbeck 1996; Hellbeck: 2006).

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, this revisionism has extended into studies of Platonov as scholars work to recover the fiction of Platonov from the "totalitarian" framework that prevailed during the Cold War among late Soviet and Western critics alike. As Pavel Khazanov explains in his recent article, our deepened understanding of Stalinism as a "multivaried, mass cultural phenomenon" has

made it impossible to ignore Platonov's "more than superficial commitment to the Soviet project" and required scholars to adopt a "more supple framework, with recent studies emphasizing precisely his Stalin-era activities" (Khazanov 2018: 3, 4). What Platonov's long-under-appreciated fiction and critical writings from the 1930s reveal, Khazanov argues, is that, years after the doubts and despair of *The Foundation Pit*, Platonov continued to produce excellent leftist fiction within the context and institutional frameworks of Stalinism while working, in coordination with other "Honest Jacobins" like Mikhail Lifshitz and György Lukács, "not just to comprehend the Stalinist turn or to fall for its charms, but to change it" (Ibid: 4). "Revisionist" Platonov scholars have not stopped at turning to Platonov for insight into Soviet subjectivity. Indeed, new generations of Platonovists have followed Frederic Jameson's proposal that we turn to Platonov's fiction in hopes of discovering the "rudiments and [...] nascent forms [...] of [a] socialist culture that [are] utterly unlike 'socialist realism' and intimate [...] some far future of human history [which] the rest of us are not in a position to anticipate" (Jameson 1994: 74). Furthermore, as Joan Brooks recently argued, "[l]eftist intellectuals in Russia (and increasingly abroad) now look to Platonov as a visionary who mapped the flows of revolutionary desire with unmatched sophistication and feeling. Instead of treating his works as documents of oppression and despair, many leftist readers are reclaiming his legacy, pushing the emancipatory potential of his thought and imagery in new directions" (Brooks 2018: 219).

Lane's intended intervention, then, is to reclaim Platonov from "leftists [who] have not entirely abandoned the claims of Marxists" (129) as an apolitical existentialist revolutionary. Platonov, Lane believes, rejected Soviet communality in favor of a capital-I "Inner common" (132) and was opposed to Marxist historical dialectics (10), the "culture of the proletariat" (2), modernization and industrialization, "so-called 'revolutionary consciousness'" (133), and just about anything with the adjective "Soviet" attached to it. It is not until the afterword of the book that Lane reveals in full the "strangely apolitical political" agenda (130) that motivates her scholarly endeavor and which she ascribes to Platonov. She does, however, leave some signposts in the introduction. Lane expresses her ambition to "'de-position' Platonov in relation to the political camps that emerged as a response to the 1917 October Revolution" (3). She acknowledges that Platonov's rediscovery in the 1960s and 1970s was "situated within the politicized framework of the Cold War" (3-4), but she does so not in order to identify the ways in which this context served to erase Platonov's political commitment, but,

rather, to lament that “most scholars have felt obliged to somehow position him in relation to the Revolution” (4). Platonov, Lane argues, was “not interested in ideological constructions” (22). Instead, he sought to show how the “depoliticization of life is caught up in [...] politics” (52), that “there is no truth, no form, no art, and ultimately, no life to possess and to make your own” (30), and that the “Revolution [led] only to starvation” (43). Claims like these are characteristic of this book and are as poorly supported as they are contrary to the ethic of Platonov.

Among Platonov’s principal motivations, Lane believes, was the desire to reveal “the disastrous mechanisms at work in the communist interpretation of history” (130). She resurrects this Cold War-era stance in opposition to “those [leftists like Jameson] who have argued that Platonov was a ‘good’ Communist throughout his life, a believer, an ideologue clinging to the “good” utopia of the socialist revolution and its promise to emancipate mankind, and yet also perspicacious enough to recognize how the ideals went wrong in their realization” (130). In lieu of serious polemic with the leftists in question, Lane argues that to make such a claim “would be to adopt a political position” (130) and claims, inexplicably, that Platonov himself “persistently resists taking such a stance” (130). Lane, it is implied, naturally occupies a neutral position outside of politics. Lane limits herself to a few throwaway references to Jameson and one sentence attributing this position to him (130). As far as other leading leftist readings of Platonov are concerned, she ignores Jonathan Flatley’s 2008 *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* altogether, consigns Artem Magun’s landmark 2010 “Andrei Platonov’s Negative Revolution” to a single footnote, and makes no mention of the important work of Oxana Timofeeva, Igor’ Chubarov, or Joan Brooks (Flatley 2008; Magun 2010; Timofeeva 2012; Chubarov 2014; Brooks 2015, 2016, 2018). In lieu of a substantive engagement with the revisionist leftist scholarship on Platonov from the past three decades, Lane attempts, unsuccessfully, to pivot away from the subject of politics entirely and, thereby, to reassert Western liberals’ claims to the final, “depoliticizing,” post-historical word on the legacy of leftist art. In this review, I will explore the misrepresentations of Platonov’s creative work and political identity which this approach entails.

To be sure, Platonov’s work appeals to readers beyond the political left. Lane, like many readers of Platonov, seems to be attracted to the radical communalism depicted and enacted in Platonov’s artistic work. She is, however, unable to acknowledge this identification without negating every aspect of the real communality from which

these works of art emerged and which they were created to engender. To this end, she translates Platonov's art and politics into a more familiar, vaguely existentialist language that allows her to sidestep the overtly communist form and content of Platonov's fiction. By way of example we may consider her corrective to Jameson, in which she argues that what Platonov "distinguished and cherished was a facet of the communist utopia that [...] was not in accord with the historical narrative of the Revolution," namely: "participation in common being as an experience that is equally or even more fundamental than the experience of the self" (130). She does not explain how this participation in common being contradicts the historical narrative of the Revolution.

Lane lays the foundation for her existentialist reading of Platonov in a scattershot way, often explaining and attempting to substantiate her use of key concepts retrospectively. She attaches the adjective "existential" to nouns without explanation, as in "existential impressions" (50), "existential legend" (95), and "existential tone" (119). Platonov's basic affinity with Heidegger, according to Lane, consists in the fact that, like Heidegger, Platonov "does not describe the world apart from man's relation to it," "does not separate man from his being in the world," and conceives of the world "not as an object" but as something that "always already implies the way that man is in the world" (64). Why Platonov's tendency to convey "how man's being in the world determines his understanding of reality and meaning" makes him an existentialist not a Marxist materialist (as he presented himself) is a riddle Lane does not answer (68; Flatley 2008: 178).

Lane makes abundant use of Bataille's concepts of inner experience (or "the Inner," as she refers to it) (6) and ecstasy (8) from the very beginning, but it is only on page 104 (of a 134-page book!) that she offers a specific, if somewhat circular explanation of her usage of the terms: "George Bataille [...] describes interiority or 'Inner experience' as a place of sensitive ecstasy, where the I, the subject, is able to meet and fathom the entire world in himself as a place of fusion of subject and object" (104). Lane, who spends much of the book railing against Hegelian and dialectical thinking, follows Bataille in defining this inner experience "in [specifically Hegelian] terms of a negativity with regard to the conscious self" as a place "where the world in its outer strangeness keeps on living as the own and as the source of communality" (104). Both terms prove attractive to Lane in that they help her to address the communalism and communist affect that are hallmarks of Platonov's fiction while negating their real analogues in Soviet society in favor of an interiority made up

of “representations and images” of others (104). Lane distinguishes, sometimes, between two ecstasies: the “Outer” (bad) one that motivates revolutionary activity and socialist construction and the “Inner” (good) one defined by contemplation of the other, dreams, and other “nocturnal experience of the world in the self” (131).

These ideas are inextricably linked to two concepts developed by Nancy, which Lane adopts in her attempt to “de-position” Platonov with respect to his own political worldview. The first, “literary communism,” is supposed to imply “an experience of the common [...] which differs from the historical forms of realization of communism” (6). It is clear why Lane would want this—Platonov’s beautiful representations of communist collectivity challenge her belief that historical communism must be renounced in its entirety—but it is not clear how this retrospective break can be imposed, how she justifies it vis-à-vis Platonov’s political identity, or how this artificial divorce between communist experience and real historical communism can be imagined to be compatible with a Heideggerian phenomenology. This same problem defines her usage of Nancy’s notion of “being in common” or “the experience of existence in common,” which she defines as “an intimate sharing of the world that resists all forms of representation” and opposes to “common being,” a “collective body that can become the object of a state cult, much like the proletariat in the Soviet Union” (6). At times, however, it seems Lane reverts to using the two terms interchangeably (130). Terminology aside, Lane is right that Platonov was preoccupied with the all-but-insurmountable task of representing this communality but wrong to imagine that Platonov sought to separate “the experience of existence in common” from the real proletariat.

Lane’s underlying claim about the relevance of existentialist thought to Platonov’s depictions of modern political subjectivity may well be valid, but it is not supported in this book. Lane briefly acknowledges Thomas Seifrid’s “brief remark on the existential theme in Platonov’s works” in a footnote (16). She does not, however, seriously engage with the broader treatment of Platonov’s proletarian ontology which lies at the heart of Seifrid’s foundational Western monograph on Platonov. This is a consequential omission, because Seifrid has already offered the sort of depoliticizing, philosophically informed study of Platonov’s “tendency to treat the historical experience of the proletariat as the emanation of something still more fundamental, namely ontology,” which Lane attempts here (Seifrid 1992: 33–34). Seifrid does so, moreover, with greater rigor and the benefit of his extensive knowledge of the specific philosophical, artistic, and institutional contexts in which Platonov wrote. Whereas

Seifrid works to explain the commonalities between existentialist thought and Platonov's proletarian ontology in relation to the writer's readings in Russian and Soviet philosophy, Lane sidesteps the questions of influence and intellectual history entirely. The ahistoricism of her approach is especially evident in her attempt to distinguish between "proletarian existentialist realism" and Socialist Realism. Recognizing that "It may perhaps seem inadequate to compare something Platonov wrote in the Voronezh period [in the early 1920s, when Lane claims Platonov developed this realist aesthetic] to the doctrine for Soviet art that was officially established only in 1934," she nevertheless claims that "what he reacts to and rejects in this manifesto is precisely the desire to find edifying art in the doctrine [of Socialist Realism]" (29–30).

As far as memory studies are concerned, Lane does not engage with the theory from this field to any significant effect. Rather, as her title suggests, she argues that Platonov "seek[s] to suggest the forgotten ways in which life after the Revolution signifies" (31) and to recover "the forgotten utopian dream of a common world" (13). Nowhere does she suggest why the Revolution, which is very much alive and present in Platonov's time and works, needed to be recovered or what utopian communality was forgotten through the Revolution. One senses that she conflates our own contemporary forgetfulness (she opens the book by pointing to the forthcoming centennial of the Revolution) with Platonov's. More importantly, the displacement of Platonov's present- and future-oriented utopian art to an undefined past may be seen as an indication that Lane is actually attempting to recast Platonov not as an apolitical revolutionary, but as a conservative one. She would have done well, again, to consult Flatley's book, which offers a more convincing, Freudian-Benjaminian reading of melancholia, loss, and the utopian impulse in Platonov (Flatley 2008: 1–6, 64–65, 70, 72–73, 163, 178, 180).

Another major issue with this book relates to Lane's understanding of narrative art. Platonov produced some of the most complex and experimental narrative fiction in early Soviet literature, a period that was defined by experimentation. Lane by and large disregards the finer points of narrative theory, equating the views and utterances of characters to those of the historical author when they support her arguments. Thus, she makes a great deal of her claim that Nazar Chagataev from Platonov's novella, "consumes encounters with others as ephemeral and temporary, much as he would ingest something edible," simply because the old man Sufyan, whom Chagataev has forgotten from early childhood, says "What goes into you, comes

out again later. But what's inside me remains there" (97). Time and time again, Lane characterizes Platonov's artistic activity as the "thematization" (13, 14) or "chronicling" (2) of the Revolution, thus failing to recognize that Platonov, a self-reflexively Marxist writer, understood art—his own in particular—to be art to the extent that it transforms, rather than reflects, thematizes, chronicles, or holds a mirror to reality. One cannot appreciate Platonov's aesthetics without taking this point seriously.

Lane's choice of the word "chronicle" may reflect Platonov's own use of the word in the title of *For Future Use: A Poor Peasant's Chronicle* (Platonov 2009). Platonov's point in using the word in the title, however, is to problematize the understanding of literature as historical chronicle and to throw into question the position of the writer and the authority of his own text. As the frame narrator of *For Future Use* relates, the writer is nothing more than a "wandering contemplator," a "half-bastard, because he is not a direct participant in the work of building communism." So long as one "is located outside of labor and the ranks of the proletariat," one cannot "see true things," because "valuable observation can occur only from the feeling of full-blooded work on the establishment of socialism" (Ibid: 285). Certainly, Platonov's oeuvre attests to the fact that he did see value in literature, but that value, for Platonov, is determined in large part by the author's ability to resist this notion of revolutionary literature as a chronicle of reality. As he elaborates in the unpublished preface to *For Future Use*, literature should not "preserve the elementary feelings [of the collective] which nourish it" but, rather, "dialectically destroy them and itself enter into contradiction with reality in order to develop in relation to it a leading, thrust-like force" (Kornienko 1993: 153). Lane's advocacy for a non- or anticommunist understanding of communist literature disposes her to misrepresent this dialectical aesthetics of transformative negativity as a chronicle of the Revolution's failures.

Lane assumes the Revolution's failures to have been total and indisputable. Her monolithic disavowal of the event reads as if the last few generations of "revisionist" and "post-revisionist" scholarship had never been written. She does not engage with or even acknowledge this important work, let alone offer a substantive critique. Her polemical aspiration is for leftists to abandon "claims [...] they are not only telling a different historical narrative from a different perspective, but that the Revolution launched Russia onto a unique historical path" (129), as if these simple and unassuming contentions were subject to dispute. True to tradition, her uncritical use of the concept of "totalitarianism" and assumption of its

universal applicability to the Soviet project reduces Soviet subjects and Platonov's characters to cowering, passive victims of state terror and propaganda, deprived of all agency and incapable of reflection and communication (61). As to the cause and nature of the Revolution's failure, Lane attributes it to flawed "implementation," as one might attribute badly assembled furniture to poorly followed instructions (1). She uses this ambiguous and somewhat euphemistic word over twenty times, effectively walling off the entire complex and enormous event of revolution to critical analysis.

In fact, Lane seems to assume the entire lived historical experience of Soviet communism to be entirely inaccessible or even unreal. If one must make reference to historical reality, Lane's book suggests that it should be to state propaganda. The "people," Lane tells us, uncritically adopting the monolithic sense of the Russian term, "have no other access to experience than their appropriation of official slogans" (61). In her treatment of one of Platonov's war stories, "Inspired People," she sees Platonov's portrayal of his "heroes' ability to sacrifice themselves for the common cause in a state of complete self-oblivion" as an expression of "official propaganda" (120), as if the very real self-sacrifice without which Soviet victory in World War II would not have been possible were only the stuff of myth. Even the Soviet name for this defensive war against fascist invaders is, inexplicably, made subject to doubt with the designation, "the so-called Great Fatherland War" (120). The militant incredulity with which Lane applies the qualification "so-called" to ("everyday life") (111), "revolutionary consciousness" (133), and, implicitly, to the entire Soviet experience bespeaks one of the underlying motivations articulated in the book's afterword: to reassert liberal hegemony over the legacy of communist culture in the face of postsocialist leftist claims to a "different historical narrative from a different perspective" (129).

Lane is, of course, entitled to her own views on the legacy of the Russian Revolution, but what is entirely inappropriate is her attempt to project her own disdain for everything Soviet, Marxist, or proletarian onto Platonov. She imagines that Platonov too can only bear to apply the adjectives "liberated" and "emancipated" to Soviet people if they are set off ironically in scare quotes (34). She would like us to believe that Platonov set out only to portray the "madness and horror of the postrevolutionary fervor" (7), the "chaos of the postrevolutionary calamities" (34), the Revolution's "concrete horrendous development in society" (10), the "catastrophic muddle of bureaucratic false assertions about the people and power" (44), and the way "people [...] err by succumbing to the Bolshevik ratio-

nalization of history” (52–53). Thus, Lane recasts a simple, touching scene in “The River Potudan” in which Liuba and Nikita contemplate having a baby now that the Civil War is over, as “a talk about history, which reflects their appropriation of the consciousness of the role that they have to play in Soviet society” (112).

Lane does not take Platonov’s basic political commitments and class identity seriously. Her Platonov “criticized the development of a culture of the proletariat in Soviet society” (2) and “probed the disastrous aspects of the implementation of a new proletarian community” (5). Unsurprisingly, she is astonished that Platonov, after having been criticized by Stalin and some proletarian critics, does not relinquish his “endless fidelity to the ruling class of the proletariat” (9). Ignoring the better part of Platonov’s writings on proletarian culture, including the abovementioned reflections on socialist construction as the only legitimate form of art, Lane tells us that Platonov did not turn “to the proletariat [...] for their forms of production as a model for the new art” (20). How does Lane understand the term, “proletarian”? She interprets the term creatively through the Latin etymology of poverty, which also includes the sense of “produc[ing] very little” (12). She does appreciate that it has something to do with work, as we see in her assertion that “*The Foundation Pit* is one of the more proletarian of Platonov’s novels, in the sense that the central allegory of the book is related to work, to digging” (62). Work, for readers entirely unfamiliar with Platonov, occupies a central place in almost all of the author’s fiction.

Equally confounding is Lane’s conviction that Platonov shared her scorn for materialism and dialectical thinking. Lane puzzles over how Platonov could be a Marxist and yet remain “critical of materialism” (122), ignoring the overwhelming abundance of evidence to the contrary. This is the same writer who, confronted with the 1921 famine in his native Voronezh region, gave up the “contemplative activity of literature” in favor of “work transforming matter,” the writer who believed that “Under the proletariat, the soul of all sciences will be materialism” (Inozemtseva 1971: 100; Platonov 2004c: 180, 2004b: 95). Dialectics, for Lane, is a dirty word, and she appears to be completely unaware of the instrumental role dialectical conceptions of labor, art, and history played in Platonov’s theory and praxis from the earliest stages through his mature work. She concludes that Nastia’s proposal that the diggers in *The Foundation Pit* kill the collective farmers who wish to reclaim their coffins is “a simple and satirical allusion to the historical schema of *diamat*” (72) but does not supply any evidence that would justify this connection. She is certain that Platonov opposed Lenin’s spontaneity–consciousness dialectics,

arguing that Platonov “develops the notion of a “spontaneous consciousness” (3), but she does not clearly articulate what distinguishes Platonov’s depictions of emergent socialist consciousness from an intermediary stage in Lenin’s dialectics.

Platonov, as Lukács so insightfully argues in his 1937 article about the author—an article written during their collaboration at the journal *Literary Critic*—embodies the Socialist Realist prescription to represent reality “in its revolutionary development” far better than the official models with their “ready-made” characters. Platonov, Lukács writes, manages to show “the new person’s complex process of becoming, full [as it is] of contradictions,” the “complex dialectic with which personal, individual inclinations and particularities of individual people are consciously presented in relation to [their] work,” and the ways in which “the personality is liberated from its bonds [and] its abilities and human dignity grow” (Lukács 1937: 55, 58). Like the Stalinist establishment, Lane expects revolutionary consciousness to be depicted in “ready-made” characters, whereas Platonov’s dialectics operate on the basis of a much longer historical trajectory. Platonov, as he explains in his 1934 essay, “On the First Socialist Tragedy,” understood dialectics as “an expression of the miserliness, the cruelty of nature’s construction so difficult to overcome” thanks to which “the historical education of humankind is possible” (2011a: 641). Nature pushes back on the laborer who would transform it with equal force such that it is as yet impossible to expend p energy and receive $p+1$ in return. One must study nature’s dialectics, arm oneself with technology, learn where to apply pressure, and harness the power of nature’s “tailwinds” in order to receive a “positive balance” through one’s work (Ibid: 641–42). Platonov understands socialism as the “tragedy of a straining soul overcoming its own wretchedness,” a tragedy in which people change more slowly than they change nature and which will only be resolved in the “most distant future” (Ibid: 643). What made Platonov a visionary was his ability to recognize and accept the tragic terms of nature’s dialectics, identifying the stirrings of a future consciousness in the chaotic spontaneity of the present and applying his political and artistic agency toward affecting this qualitative transformation.

Platonov’s theoretical writings and fictional literature about the transformative power of technology are grounded in nearly a decade of practical work in engineering, land reclamation, electrification, and collective agriculture (Inozemtseva 1971). It is all the more surprising, then, that Lane is so committed to the idea that Platonov—who, as we have seen, saw socialist construction as the highest form of art—is critical not only of the notions of emancipation (10),

enlightenment (10), and civilization (12), but also of progress (84) and “modernization in general” (15). To be sure, Platonov matured beyond the fervent technological utopianism of his youth, but this development was defined by the search for the right place to apply the pressure of technology vis-à-vis the dialectics of nature, not a rejection of the premises that history has a shape or that humankind must work to shape it.

Lane’s treatment of Platonov’s critique of subjectivity raises one of the most central problems of his work but is derailed by her desire to “de-position” Platonov with respect to Marxism. What, after all, distinguishes Lane’s existentialist model from the self-abnegation that, for better and for worse, characterized most varieties of Marxist praxis? Both entail certain contradictions, but in the case of Marxist selfhood, these contradictions are explained by and, indeed, constitute the essence of a dialectical conception of a subjectivity premised in both flux and identity. Lane’s model, by contrast, is simply incoherent. Her principal theses are that Platonov not only “avoids the very idea of subjectivity” (8) (while also “touch[ing] upon questions of subjectivity” [8]), but also opposed “modern subjectivity and its view of individual autonomy” (13) and set out to show that “subjectivity is a dystopia” (56). Meanwhile, she argues, Platonov advocated for a turn toward “the Inner.”

Lane makes no effort to disentangle her Bataille-inspired conception of “the Inner” from its Hegelian roots, which she does briefly acknowledge, adding that “[l]ike [Hegel and Bataille, Platonov] regards the Inner, or interiority, in terms of a negativity with regard to the conscious self” (104). She fails to see any contradictions between her use of terms like “Inner,” “interiority,” “conscious self,” “at home in himself” (49), “outside of himself” (49), “other to himself” (50), or “the own” (104) with her ideas about Platonov’s opposition to subjectivity. Presumably, Lane considers these issues to be resolved by her reliance on Heidegger’s notion of “*Versunkenheit*—the praxis of falling into the self—[understood as] [...] a constantly present other world” (105). She neither gives a convincing account of what it means for “the own [to be] strange and foreign, and [...] the foreign and strange [to be] the own” (95) in the absence of subjectivity, nor does she justify attributing these ideas to Platonov.

Platonov’s Marxist critique of selfhood takes issue with exactly this sort of unchanging, ahistorical conception of personal identity for the precise reason that it precludes the transformation of self, society, and consciousness required of the revolutionary subject. In a passage from *Happy Moscow* cited by Lane, the narrator tells us that Sartorius came to appreciate that he must “study the entire volume

of flowing life by means of transforming himself into other people” so that “unknown feelings of other people can come into him in succession” (Platonov 2011b: 94–95 and 85). This is not the story of an existentialist passively contemplating the presence of others in himself. Moscow mentors Sartorius in her idiosyncratic practice of communism, teaching him the hard lesson that “Love cannot be communism” (Ibid: 52) and inspiring him to undertake the first of many intended transformations with her own relinquishment of personal identity and transformation into Musia Koriagina, wife of an impoverished volunteer militia officer. Sartorius comes to believe that he must actively study and turn “himself” into others in order to overcome the obstacles that sexuality and fixed personal identity pose to realizing his ideal of active communist collectivism. As Platonov explains in his writer’s notebook, this plot development was supposed to allow Sartorius to “enrich and populate the world” (Platonov 2000: 182) with souls and culminate in Sartorius being reincarnated as Moscow herself, as “a women—the savior of the world” (Ibid: 162). This idiosyncratic and, from the standpoint of contemporary gender theory, thoroughly revolutionary project has little in common with the depoliticized existentialist critique of subjectivity which Lane attributes to Platonov.

Outsidedness is indeed an important category for Platonov, and Lane’s use of ecstasy (the etymology of which—“*ék* out + *ιστάναι* to place”—reflects this sense of being “outside” or “beside oneself”) in her interpretation is illuminating, to a degree (OED 2020). Enthusiasm, however, a related concept more native to early Soviet philosophy, better accounts both for the interplay of selfhood and otherness and the orientation toward transformation which shape Platonov’s negative model of subjectivity. As I have written elsewhere,

For Hegel, the “Bacchic enthusiasm” (Hegel’s usage of the German *Begeisterung* or “en-spirit-ment” is usually translated as “enthusiasm,” a choice justified, here, by the association with Bacchus) involves a two-step process of self-objectification. It consists in the initial movement of the subject beyond itself and in the reciprocal penetration of abstract Spirit into the material reality of the enthusiast’s body. As enthusiasm scholar Jordy Rosenberg argues, Hegel understood enthusiasm as the “longing of the mind for an immediacy of knowledge and identification with Spirit,” an “identification so strong that the distance between subject and object was thought to blur.” Though illusory, this “fantasy of immediacy” motivates the subject to undertake the next negation and, thus, provides the impulse necessary for the continued dialectical movement of thought. (Cieply 2020: 396)

Lane is right that, for Platonov, the “experience of being in common not only goes beyond the conscious subject of experience but also appears somehow contradictory to it” (8). What she fails to appreciate is that, for a dialectical thinker like Platonov, the movement beyond the self and resulting contradiction with the enthusiast’s subjectivity are followed by a third stage: the “negation of the negation,” which integrates the otherness experienced in this state into a transformed, provisional identity. This is the understanding of narrative art and political subjectivity which Platonov had in mind when he wrote that the author must “dialectically destroy [the elementary feelings of the collective] and itself enter into contradiction with reality in order to develop in relation to it a leading, thrust-like force” (Kornienko 1993: 153).

Many of Lane’s central arguments concern the cognitive and communicative faculties of Platonov’s characters. She is certain that Platonov’s rendition of revolutionary voice was intended to show that “the people” are “incapable of establishing a meaningful and dignified relationship with [...] life and society” and “unable to make sense of what they see and experience (30–31). Platonov’s characters, she writes, cannot “‘read’ the world intelligently” (52), lack “the ability to reflect on their own position” (55), and, moreover, she tells us in a point that plainly contradicts her central theses about subjectivity in Platonov, “Platonov’s subject is not a person capable of reflection but a spectator” (132). She apparently sees no contradiction between these claims and her acknowledgment that Platonov’s characters “seek to make sense of their own experience” (74) and “constantly discuss the meaning of the Revolution” (35). She has such a didactic understanding of literature (in spite of her existentialist preoccupation with “meaninglessness”) that she writes that “none of [his characters] offers any insights from which we can read any moral to the story,” as if the insight or meaning one should look for in a profoundly complex writer like Platonov would come in the form of a moral (35–36). She finds in Platonov’s characters’ speech only “words of confusion, of myth, meaninglessness, and the people, who are not liberated and not aware” (15) and believes that Platonov made characters like Kopenkin from Chevengur make errors in word choice in order to “deride [...] their failed attempt to acquire the new revolutionary dignity and subjectivity” (34–35). These views are particularly surprising to encounter after Lane opens her book by criticizing previous Platonov scholars, whose works “have generally been guided by normative ideals of linguistics and tend to assume that his writings are odd in relation to the ‘normal’ experience of everyday life”

(12). She does not substantiate her interpretation of the speech of Platonov's characters with linguistic analysis.

Lane believes that meaninglessness and alienation are the "common and nonalienation the uncommon state of things" (12–13). She is careful, however, not to read alienation in the Marxist sense of the term, which is intrinsic to Platonov's thinking, and seems to believe cognitive deficiencies to be more characteristic of the proletariat and to result from Platonov's characters' "mistaken belief that they are implementing the Revolution by appropriating and carrying out the slogans" (35). Lane is at once close and far from the truth when she describes the "inverted revolutionary consciousness in which their nonknowledge, nonunderstanding, and nonbelonging are the most significant truths about the world" (10). Platonov does portray revolutionary consciousness through an inverted narrative construction, and "nonknowledge" from the normative perspective that Lane criticizes is indeed central to understanding the text. As the narrator of *For Future Uses* muses as he looks over the mistake-ridden instructions for operating an electro-sun at a collective farm,

All this was completely correct and good, and I rejoiced in this real construction of new life. True, there was something touching and funny in this phenomenon, but it was the touching uncertainty of childhood, outstriding you, and not the falling irony of doom. If such occurrences were not encountered, we would never arrange humanity and would not feel our humanness, for the new person is funny to us like Robinson to the ape; his undertakings seem naïve to us, and we secretly want him to not abandon us to die alone and to return to us. But he will not return, and every person who is poor in soul [*dushevnyi bedniak*], the only property of which is doubt, will perish in the vacant country of the past (Platonov 2009: 293–94).

The narrator conflates *Robinson Crusoe* with a line from Nietzsche: "What is the ape to man? A laughing stock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughing stock or a painful embarrassment" (1995: 12). In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, it is the creatures of lower development who are observed and condescended to, whereas in Platonov, the gaze—along with the underlying discursive hierarchy—is reversed: the ape is the observer and laughs at what he naïvely understands to be the foolish undertakings of man. The narrator expresses his admiration for the naïveté of the directives using a formulation that unconsciously conflates and misconstrues Defoe and Nietzsche according to a loosely Marxist view of history. Though the narrator is ready to recognize in himself the

ape, he does not know just how naïve he seems to the reader, who catches the hybrid reference. The reader, grinning at the narrator's blunder, may forget that in Platonov's artistic world, it is the ape who laughs from his own backwardness before the higher person.

This is what Lane gets wrong about the appropriation of slogans in Platonov. For Platonov, the unique appropriative capacity of the proletariat constitutes one of its greatest merits. In the 1921 "Life to the End," an article combining a militant disavowal of art and practical advice for irrigation workers, Platonov gives allegorical articulation to the constructive principles that would later underlie the political consciousness of his proletarian characters. Platonov renounces theoretical approaches to the construction of barrier walls in favor of the improvisatory instinct of the practical worker. He writes,

Building them from clay is not enough, and it is not necessary: they can be built from another suitable material, whatever is easiest to get on the location,—anything from simple earth-fill [...] to such a luxury as concrete. They can be made from big stone boulders, connected with cement, and from fine gravel, and from various combinations [...] You can also substitute brick, logs, furnace cinder, etc [...] such details [...] can only be determined by specialists and cannot be determined ahead of time: build from whatever is possible, adjust yourself to the conditions of the soil, figure it out when you are at the work itself. I am against theory: practice itself will show you how to do it best and in the most economical way (Platonov 2004c: 182).

Like Claude Lévi-Strauss's *bricoleur*, Platonov's ideal irrigation engineer and the proletarian speakers in his fiction construct new improvised wholes from "heterogeneous [...] tools and materials," the "remains of previous constructions or destructions," and "whatever is at hand," for their own transformative purposes (Lévi-Strauss 1962: 17). In the face of severe shortages, the irrigation worker is left to work with "brick, logs, and furnace cinder," just as Platonov's proletarian speakers must repurpose the philosophical discourses that they have inherited from bourgeois culture and political slogans. Platonov's practical workers and speakers share a consciousness that is enthusiastic in its free and creative appropriation of these found materials in the interest of future constructions.

At times it appears as if Lane is on the brink of discovering the Marxist significance of Platonov's treatment of alienation or depictions of how "man's being in the world determines his understanding of reality and meaning" (68), but she invariably translates these ideas into her own existentialist terms without making the connection.

She writes that Platonov's characters often "begin to get a faint sense of their own alienation" (8). In reality, their deep and painful consciousness of their own alienation is the basic motivation for the characters' revolutionary activity, as we see in the speech of Filat—a "sad laborer" and "the most persecuted, the most silent, and the least fed person on earth"—at his induction into the collective farm in *For Future Use*: "I, comrades, speak quietly, because no one ever asked me. I only think about there being happiness sometime in the day-laborer's pot, but I'm afraid to gulp down that happiness—may it be granted to others [...] my heart grew used to woe and deceit, and you give me happiness—my chest won't withstand it" (Platonov 2009: 341–42).

Lane recognizes that Platonov's proletarian characters are "closer or more sincere in their experience of [...] alienation" (10) and that "it is in the truth of alienation that the germ of nonalienation is to be retrieved" (8) but does not make the connection to the Marxist understanding of the relation of alienation to revolutionary consciousness. She muses about Platonov's "other revolution," which consists of the "insight that without the other, man cannot feel anything but despair and estrangement" (103) but fails to understand that, in Platonov's Marxist understanding of revolution, one cannot learn to feel the other without despair and estrangement. Lane argues that, for Platonov, "aesthetics and culture [...] could [only] be reborn if they were based on the experience of the people" (19), that he "portrays the world as a relation, a way of being *in* rather than an object" (65), and that his "depiction of reality is based on man's being in the world" (69). She fails, however, to understand the simple correlation of these views and aesthetic sensibilities to Platonov's basic dialectical materialist approaches to subject-object relationality and the primacy of base over superstructure. She rightly identifies Platonov's tendency to portray consciousness "at the very moment of the in between of the transfer between the old and the new" (56), but rather than recognizing "the new person's complex process of *becoming*," as Lukács put it, she finds only Platonov "point[ing] at the impossibility of a transfer and a transition between these oppositions" (56).

In terms of textual analysis, Lane makes ample use of block citations from Platonov in translation, accompanied by the original Russian. With surprising frequency, however, the cited passages do not correspond with one another entirely (for example on pages 109 and 111–12) or, in one case, at all: a translation of Komiagin's poem from *Happy Moscow* is paired with an original Russian passage from *The Foundation Pit* (87–88). Typically, Lane follows these block

citations with “close-readings,” paraphrasing the original text. She proceeds to her own interpretations, which often have little discernible relation the cited passage or, worse, directly contradict the source material. In her analysis of a Platonov’s 1920 article responding to critics, Lane tells us that “[h]is outside position is the position of nontruth, nonbeauty, and nonform that has no value but in the way that it is everything, in the way that it *is*” (27). The inscrutable latter half of this sentence runs entirely contrary to what Platonov has to say about proletarian art. Lane tells us that Platonov is “dirty [...] and insignificant,” that “the proletariat [...] is defined as lacking material means and thus also any access to the future as such,” and that Platonov was opposed to “culture and human dignity” (27). Platonov does identify the proletarian condition with dirt, but his whole point in the short passage cited by Lane is to identify the value that comes with the historically necessary future dignity of proletarian culture: “we will cleanse ourselves [...] Therein lies our meaning” (27). This is a fundamental lesson that Lane misses throughout the book: she sees the failures of the proletariat in the revolutionary present as evidence of its insignificance, whereas Platonov’s point is to attribute meaning to those aspects of the present which indicate the proletariat’s gradual development toward future redemption in socialism. Lane follows this point by claiming that this “sense of the formless living must be preserved, as must the understanding of how their errancy testifies to a search,” whereas what Platonov explicitly says, in a passage that she also cites, is that “we are not erring” (*my ne bluzhdaem*) (28).

It is often difficult to understand whether Lane has misunderstood or is simply misrepresenting the text. For instance, Lane characterizes the opening scene of *Dzhan* as “breath[ing] an atmosphere of the past,” whereas, in the passage in question, the narrator tells us that Chagataev, having graduated from his institute, “came back to himself from the long time that had passed” and attained “clearer view of the whole of this summer world, now warmed by an evening sun that had had its day,” an image, in other words, of the future preparing to spring into existence (95). In her analysis of the story, “Inspired People,” Lane tells us that “It is significant that instead of the word ‘sacrifice’ to describe what they did, he uses ‘*istratit*,’ (to waste or exhaust) and ‘*unichtozhit*’ (eliminate, destroy). It is their communist background that makes the sailors willing to exhaust life and be reduced to nothing” (122). In the cited passage, however, the narrator explicitly says that “they understood that they had not been born into the world to squander [*istratit*] and destroy [*unichtozhit*] their lives in fruitless enjoyment of it, but to return it to justice”

(122). It is unlikely that Lane willfully misrepresented this passage to say the exact opposite of what it says, but her eagerness to frame communist belief as fanaticism certainly played a role in the mistake.

Outright errors in translation and basic understanding of the text abound, sometimes leading to more significant interpretive issues. She mistranslates Kopenkin's horse's name in *Chevengur* (*Proletarskaia sila*, or "Proletarian power") as "Revolutionary Force" (37) and *Sovietskaia vlast'* ("Soviet power" or "the Soviet government") as "Communist power" (51). In *The Foundation Pit*, she misconstrues *organizovannyj kotel* ("organized cauldron") as "'organized' pothole" (74). She argues that Chagataev from *Dzhan* does not understand the communality implied by the word "Dzhan" in conscious life but does come to appreciate this truth in sleep. In reality, in the passage Lane cites in support of this conclusion, Chagataev reflects on the dignity of all "poor beings" and only then does he "f[all] asleep, full of astonishment at strange reality" (94).

The book is also marred by factual errors, both in terms of historical context and with regard to events related in Platonov's fiction. For instance, Lane describes *Chevengur* as "The story of Russia during the Civil War" (2), a war in which, according to Lane, "Chevengur will lose" and "its inhabitants will all perish" (54). *Chevengur* is approximately four hundred pages, of which approximately forty-five pages (67–111 in the academic edition) are set during the Civil War. She writes that *Dzhan* is set in the mountains between Uzbekistan and Kirgizstan (14), whereas much of the novella is set in deserts located in modern-day Turkmenistan (Skakov 2012: 76). She claims that a 1920 text was written a couple of years before Platonov "enters the *Proletkul't* movement" and that he opposed the notion that proletarian art will arise from "the emergence of a different hegemonic political class" (22–23). In reality, 1920 was a year of intensive engagement with *Proletkul't* theorists, and as early as 1919 Platonov responded to proceedings from the First All-Russian *Proletkul't* Conference (1918) with a supportive article asserting that "The proletariat, burning the corpse of the bourgeoisie on the bonfire of the revolution, also burns its dead art" (Platonov 2004a: 8, 316, 317). Lane characterizes the late 1920s, a period of renewed revolutionary pathos, collectivization, "class warfare," and socialist construction after the accommodations of the New Economic Policy as a "transition from a revolutionary phase" to the "period of the State Plans (Gosplany), and the large-scale project of building new houses" (hardly an accurate characterization of the industrialization and construction projects of the First Five-Year Plan) (61). In the chapter on *Happy Moscow*, Lane tells us that Moscow and Sartorius

“revive their love” (85) after having sex near what is presumed to be Komiagin’s corpse, whereas, in reality, they part ways never to see each other again. Perplexingly, Lane writes that Sartorius (who has been living in a scale factory working day and night to design a more accurate scale for the collective farms in order to justly distribute grain and protect the “sacred goods of socialism”) is only “released from the idea of self-fulfillment” and discovers “life beyond himself” after sleeping with Moscow (85–86 and Platonov 2011b: 55). Lane also claims that Gruniakhin (Sartorius’s assumed identity) “move[s] in with the destitute and desperate Matryona Fillipovna [sic] and her sons” (86), even though one of Gruniakhin’s principal motivations in moving in with Matryona is that one of her two sons has committed suicide (Platonov 2011b: 105).

For all of the above reasons, this book cannot be regarded as a meaningful contribution to the study of Platonov or Soviet culture. Its chief value, rather, is as a case study in a troubling twenty-first-century countercurrent in Soviet studies. It speaks to a yearning for the simpler time of the Cold War, when the totalizing narrative of Soviet totalitarianism and the Western fantasy of post-political, post-historical cultural and scholarly hegemony stood uncontested.

If there is something redeeming in this study of Platonov, then, it is the possibility that the “seeds of time”—Jameson’s term for the visions of de-alienated socialist communality that attracted Lane to Platonov’s fiction—will still bear fruit, even in the hearts of those who aspire to root them out. Lane, as we have seen, does occasionally come close to appreciating some of the basic aspects of Platonov’s Marxist worldview. This is the emancipatory promise that Platonov holds for postsocialist readers. The feelings evoked by his fiction can help us to experience ways of living, working, and feeling in a collective, which have yet to be articulated in language or universalized in social institutions, even as our own ideology works to subvert this understanding. This is why it is so important to understand the verbal inadequacy on display in Platonov’s fiction not as a sign of the Revolution’s failures but as a facet of the dialectical lag between feeling and expression which, for Platonov, defined revolutionary transformation. This lag is acutely manifest in the chasm that separates the communalist art which Lane set out to describe from the conceptual and political categories into which she tried to force it. To Lane’s credit, she does identify Platonov’s preoccupation with collective feeling and its resistance to representation. In his efforts to overcome this resistance, Platonov avoided easy affirmative representations of proletarian class identity or socialist subjectivity. Thus, he risked being misread as anticommunist by Stalinist crit-

ics and Western readers alike. Rather than “chronicle” or “reflect” the revolutionary subjectivities of his time, Platonov devised and practiced a method for objectifying and eliciting in his readers the feelings which produced these subjectivities while sidestepping the reification that representing them entailed.

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